

Samy Cohen, *Doves Among Hawks. Struggles of the Israeli Peace Movements*. (Hurst, 2019)

Review by Toby Greene¹

Samy Cohen's measured and readable history of the Israeli peace camp is a welcome contribution to studies of the rise and fall of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. This is especially the case with recent revisionist accounts implying that the seeds of failure were sown by Israeli bad intentions, and that Israelis only engaged in the peace process to frustrate Palestinian national aspirations, rather than fulfil them. Seth Anziska's recent book, 'Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo'², sparked an exasperated response from Israelis like Yair Hirschfeld, an Israeli academic who created the Oslo backchannel which led to the first Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Hirschfeld, like countless other Israeli politicians, officials, academics and others, staked their careers and reputations on seeking a conflict ending agreement with the Palestinians, only to find their life's ambition frustrated. In a response to Anziska's book, Hirschfeld claimed that far from Israeli duplicity, it was "internal Palestinian divisions, conflicting external influences, and the conviction that Israel is not here to stay, [that] have prevented the establishment of a state of their own."³

Against the backdrop of such controversies, Cohen offers a worthwhile examination of the campaign for peace in Israeli society. His history seeks to explain the fate of the Israeli peace camp, by tracing its development from the beginning of the occupation in 1967, to its high tide in the early 1980s, and its subsequent decline – though the author insists not demise – in the decades since.

That the Israeli peace camp is today shrunken and demoralised, and has lost its once potent ability to mobilise mass support, is beyond doubt. So incredulous is the Israeli public that a conflict ending agreement is possible, that few Israeli politicians dare even to offer it as a serious policy goal. The word 'peace' has become synonymous for much of the Israeli public with dangerous naivety, and in the April 2019 general election the Palestinian issue barely surfaced. In recent years, Netanyahu and his coalition have grouped all their opponents into the amorphous category of "left", against which they have unleashed an unprecedented wave of incitement, in a febrile and polarized political climate.

According to Cohen, the core explanation for the decline of the peace camp is not, as often claimed, the conclusion within broad swathes of Israeli society following the failed final status talks in 2000 that there was no Palestinian peace partner. Neither, he argues, is it due to the devastating effects on the Israeli psyche of the violence of the Second Intifada, nor the electoral impact of the mass 1990s migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union. Rather, claims Cohen, based on his analysis of in-depth interviews, articles, social networks, and survey data, it is due to the "country's collective psychology" of fear, that no leader has been able to disarm.

The beginning of the occupation with the 1967 Six Day War is logically chosen as the starting point for this account, and Cohen provides an engaging description of early subterranean moves within the dominant centre-left Mapai to promote the idea of Palestinian statehood.

¹ Dr. Toby Greene is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow in the School of Politics and International Relations, Queen Mary University of London

² Anziska, S. (2018). *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo*. Princeton University Press.

³ Hirschfeld, Y. (2019). "Ten ways the Palestinians failed to move toward a state during Oslo: Yair Hirschfeld's critique of Seth Anziska's Preventing Palestine." *Fathom Journal*. Accessed from <http://fathomjournal.org/ten-ways-the-palestinians-failed-to-move-toward-a-state-during-oslo-yair-hirschfelds-critique-of-seth-anziskas-preventing-palestine/>.

The text repeatedly draws attention to the significance of the IDF's officer ranks in promoting and legitimising the case for territorial compromise. This includes the officers' letter of 1978, which helped mobilise the first mass protests of the 'Peace Now' movement in support of a land for peace deal with Egypt. This trend has continued over the decades with officers frequently becoming the most persuasive advocates of both the moral and strategic case for ending the occupation.

Cohen also reflects on the distinct social milieu of a peace movement struggling against the backdrop of constant national security crises. Grass roots peace activists were beset by a constant tension between a left wing seeking radical action against the occupation, and those seeking to avoid drifting from the mainstream consensus, which supported the military and was deeply sceptical about the Palestinians as a partner. Peace Now, the leading grass roots peace movement from the end of the 1970s, consistently sought to remain in touch with the mainstream of Israeli society by being pro-peace without being pacifist.

Interestingly, Cohen depicts the turning point for the Israeli peace movement not in 2000 with the failure of final status talks and the eruption of the Second Intifada, but in 1983, when the movement appeared to be in ascendancy having mobilised 400,000 Israelis - around one ninth of Israel's population - to rally against the war in Lebanon. This protest movement helped bring about a commission of inquiry, and eventually Begin's resignation.

But according to Cohen, the movement never achieved similar impact subsequently. The reason was the difficulty forging a consensus on the Palestinian question. Questions such as whether or not to have contact with the PLO, or to support Palestinian statehood, were divisive not only within Israeli society, but within Peace Now itself. The movement's political challenges were exacerbated by the participation of centre-left Labor - its natural political bedfellow - in national unity coalitions with centre-right Likud throughout the 1980s, denying the movement a clear political target.

Whilst the crisis of the First Intifada revived Peace Now's capacity to mobilise, deep distrust among the Israeli public for Yasser Arafat and the PLO denied the peace camp a viable political platform, and perpetually exposed them to the charge of disloyalty when challenging the occupation. The Israeli public's antipathy for the Palestinians was reinforced by Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein as he fired Scud missiles at Tel Aviv during the First Gulf War.

Cohen highlights that it was not the bottom up pressure of mass protest that led to an Israel-PLO agreement. Rather it was a combination of the cold calculations of statesman Yitzhak Rabin, who saw a breakthrough as representing Israel's interests, and the private endeavours of academics Ron Pundak and Yair Hirschfeld. These individuals, with the support of deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin, established the secret Oslo backchannel to the PLO leadership and the framework agreement, which Foreign Minister Peres and eventually Rabin eventually adopted.

According to Cohen, once embarked on the peace train, Rabin kept Peace Now at arm's length, keen to maintain a centrist image and avoid the leftist taint. For its part Peace Now avoided putting public pressure on Rabin to go further and faster than he was prepared to.

Cohen rightly identifies the decade from Rabin's assassination in November 1995 till the end of the Second Intifada in 2005 as 'fatal for the left', and points to a weakness of leadership, decline of the left wing-vote, and loss of faith in land for peace.

Whilst this narrative overall sounds right, some details are off. Cohen refers to the low turnout at a rally in September 1997, but does not mention a much larger event commemorating the second anniversary of Rabin's assassination in November 1997 (which this reviewer happened to attend)

attended by 200,000. This event demonstrated the ability of the peace camp to mobilise very large numbers in the years after Rabin's assassination. The event was also addressed by Ehud Barak, contrary to Cohen's claim that he spurned their invitation. This is one of a number of minor factual errors, which should be amended in a future edition. For example, the UN granted the PLO observer status in 1974, and not 1975; and the road accident that triggered the First Intifada was in December 1987, not November.

But a more substantive question mark faces the book's central thesis, that the roots of the peace camp's failure lie in an insoluble Israeli mentality of fear and defensiveness. Cohen acknowledged that the peace camp was dealt devastating blows by Yasser Arafat's ambivalence on reaching a conflict ending agreement during final status talks in 2000, and most devastatingly, the wave of murderous violence in the Second Intifada that he actively facilitated. Cohen poignantly describes this period when Israelis did not know where the next suicide bomb would detonate, which has left a scar on the Israeli mindset that shows no sign of healing.

Yet his interpretation of Israel's response to the Second Intifada is questionable. First, Cohen repeats a common assertion that the Gaza disengagement was intended by Sharon as a distraction to enable Israel to strengthen its hold on the West Bank. This interpretation does not ascribe sufficient weight to the startling change in Sharon's discourse in 2003, when he began describing Israel's presence in the Palestinian territories as an unsustainable 'occupation'. Nor does Cohen's interpretation cohere with the fact that Sharon broke from the Likud to form Kadima after the 2005 disengagement, precisely so that he could continue the process of evacuating isolated West Bank settlements.

Sharon's change of heart reflected the extent to which the peace camp's case that occupation was bad for Israel, and that some form of partition was the solution, had permeated the right. Even Benjamin Netanyahu overtly accepted the principle of a Palestinian state in his much-noted 2009 Bar Ilan speech.

Second, Cohen appears to overstate the extent to which, after the disengagement from Gaza, any sense of responsibility for the civilians on the other side dissipated. Cohen is justified in arguing that when attacked with rockets from the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal, Israelis became desensitised to Palestinian civilian casualties in their military response. But he does not give evidence for his very broad claim that for most Israelis at this time, "every civilian was perceived as a potential combatant." Though it is true, and perhaps indicative, that after Operation Cast Lead in 2008-9 there was no judicial inquiry, the army did investigate itself and make changes to its doctrine (for example on the use of white phosphorous). And Cohen's curious claim that Israel's leading strategic think tank INSS "did not produce a single piece of research on Operation Cast Lead", is clearly mistaken. For example, Volume 11, Issue 4 of the think tanks flagship journal *Strategic Assessment*, published just one month after the operation, was dedicated entirely to its analysis, featuring no less than 15 papers.

But the third, and most significant issue, relates to Cohen's account of the rocket threat from Gaza after disengagement. Cohen claims that the Qassam rocket attacks on Israel were higher before withdrawal than after, and that security improved as a result of the disengagement. In fact, the total rocket attacks in 2007 and 2008 (after the Hamas takeover) were far higher than the years before withdrawal. Furthermore, since the disengagement, the potency and range of rockets held by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, acquired with the help of Iran, has increased many times.

This suggests that the central problem for the Israeli peace camp is not that the Israeli psyche of fear predisposes the public from joining the cause, but rather the justified conclusion of most Israelis that previous attempts to end the occupation have resulted in greater threats to their security.

It is this dilemma – that occupation of the Palestinian people is inherently harmful for Israel, but that withdrawal leads to increased security threats - that Micah Goodman describes in his recent book, 'Catch 67'⁴ - a useful companion to readers of Cohen's volume. This dilemma is compounded by internal Palestinian division, and the repeated rejection by Palestinian Authority leaders of US brokered final status proposals. Mahmoud Abbas's rejection of the framework presented to him by the Obama administration in early 2014 is the most significant recent example. It is this political context that has put so much wind in the sails of Israel's religious and secular territorial maximalists.

It is perhaps the final chapter describing the current peace camp in Israel that represents the most original aspect of Cohen's contribution. He justifiably highlights the remarkable endurance of grass roots peace activism in the face of repeated failure and prevailing scepticism, and identifies a plethora of reconciliation NGOs, human rights organizations, and expert think tanks, alongside other non-affiliated 'free agents for peace'.

The persistence of these groups reflect not only the endurance of hope among idealists. It also reflects the repeated realization from within senior military and diplomatic ranks of the limits of the use of force, the importance of Israel's democratic character, and the dangers to Israeli society of ruling indefinitely over the Palestinians.

Indeed, more prominence ought to be given to what is arguably the most significant advocate for territorial compromise in the current Israeli policy debate, which is not a dovish peace group but rather Israel's leading strategic think tank, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). This think tank consistently argues that proactive moves towards a two state solution reflect Israel's vital national interests.

INSS – its corridors stuffed with ex-general and ambassadors – does not look like a branch of the peace camp, but is more credible for the Israeli mainstream because of that fact. The organization's stance reflects the enduring fact that so often in Israel, it is tough security figures who one might expect to be hawks, who have been most significant in advancing the agenda of the doves. Indeed, it points to the limitations of the distinction between doves and hawks when trying to understanding the mind-sets of Israeli decision makers, and the Israeli public.

Nonetheless Samy Cohen's 'Doves Among Hawks' is a valuable contribution to the literature on Israeli politics and society and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It helps recover with laudable clarity and brevity the authentic hopes of the Israeli peace camp, against a growing mythology – including within parts of the academe – of uniform Israeli malevolence and duplicity.

⁴ Goodman, M. (2018). *CATCH-67: The left, the right, and the legacy of the Six-Day War*. Yale University Press.